



The Church of England has today released its film marking Easter 2016 featuring a passion play which features individuals who have struggled with drug addiction, crime and homelessness on their journey to faith.

The film is based on Psalm 22 and contains the lines "My God, My God why have you forsaken me?" words spoken by Jesus on the Cross.

The striking imagery in the film includes a re-enactment of a passion play with Christ's Crown of Thorns being replaced with a crown of syringes to reflect the struggles of addiction faced by those who have recently come to faith in a Halifax Church called "The Saturday Gathering".

The film follows on from [The Lord's Prayer advert](#) launched by the Church last Christmas which was banned by cinemas for its religious content.

The Church's film stars are unlikely pin-ups each of whom tell their inspirational stories on the [JustPray.uk](#) website and have featured in teaser adverts for the film over the past four weeks.

Emma is 24 years old and for the first time in her life feels she has something to live for. Drugs, alcohol, and self-harming have all played their part in her young life so far. She had a chaotic family upbringing and developed her own drug habit and started to self-harm in response to an unhappy and often violent previous relationship. But her darkest time was last year when she lost a baby and she still suffers pangs of hopelessness now where she questions her faith and God, but without her faith, and the family she has found at the Saturday Gathering, she firmly believes she wouldn't be here.

Rob has lived on the streets or on his wits since a young boy. In and out of reform homes, his parents couldn't cope with his behaviour and he was kicked out of home at 15. When his older brother took his own life a few years later, Rob went completely out of control. He has lived in woods, on streets, under car parks, behind shopping centres -and drugs have been the mainstay of his survival. He found himself on the streets of Halifax after a failed relationship and intrigued by an open church on a Saturday, he walked into the Ebenezer Methodist church - and the rest as they say, is history. He came to faith at the Saturday Gathering and has slowly been rebuilding his life. And after years of being estranged from his family, he celebrated his 46th birthday in January with his mother at the Saturday Gathering Place.

40 year old Howard from Bradford came to faith eight years ago. A former addict who was in and out of prison, he was offered a place in a Christian rehab centre for young men and it was here, as he struggled with the sleeplessness and restlessness as he was withdrawing from heroin and methadone, that he began to join in the early morning prayers. It was to be his solace. But for Howard, temptation is never far away and on the day of his baptism, he used drugs again - after eight months clean. His story of faith is a constant tug of war with real bouts of doubt that can stop him praying, stop him praising and thanking God. He has been out of prison now for over 12 months and offers support to others at the Saturday Gathering and wants to be a good role model for his teenage son.

Brenda was the local white witch, heavily into the Wicca movement and its alignment with nature, conservation and the environment. But when her mother cheated death over two years ago, it was a wake up call to all the family that there was something bigger out there. Her mother died last year in difficult circumstances and all the family began to volunteer at the Night Shelter run by Christians Together in Calderdale [as a way of](#)

coming to terms with the enormity of her death. It was while volunteering one Saturday night, that Brenda - a mother of four herself - dropped into the worship and found herself overwhelmed by the love and acceptance. Brenda is now training to be a leader herself and wants to be ordained into the Church of England.

The Rev Arun Arora, Director of Communications for the Church of England said: "This film is a testament to the triumph of faith and hope over struggle. From bereavement to addiction, from homelessness to imprisonment, Easter is a reminder that suffering doesn't have the last word and that love is more powerful than the grave. Each of the stories is a testimony to the fact that Love wins. As the Church across the globe celebrates Easter day we wanted to make a film that highlighted the stories of individuals who have come through suffering to the Easter joy of faith in Jesus.

"Our brief to the filmmaker was to reflect the doubt and forsakenness that life throws at you and to track the journey from grim reality and to bleed into the colour of joy. We are delighted with the result which reflects the journey into joy."

## Notes to editors

- Film can be viewed here: <http://bit.ly/HelsRisenCofE>
- Stills from the film can be seen here: <http://bit.ly/1S2RFDx>
- Teaser films and more information on those featured in the film can be seen here: <http://www.justpray.uk/Psalm%2022>
- Interviews with those featured in the film can be heard here: <http://bit.ly/ListenToJustPray>
- Interview with Rev'd Arun Arora on Just Pray: <http://bit.ly/1R37bTA>

Read the blog from Jane Bower below:

Making the Lords' Prayer ad to promote prayer to a modern digital generation was easy in retrospect; subtle, unobtrusive film-making designed to capture genuine prayer in action.

We asked our contributors about prayer and faith in their lives, and they told us lots of different stories; from the grounded strength and passion of our Tough Talk guys who spent time visiting prisons talking about faith and transformation to the simple faith that carried James, our farmer, through his life and the ever-changing seasons.

And then we got to the Saturday Gathering. There amongst the broken and the scarred, we found an unquestioning, palpable love. "Come as you are", they said. "This is how we pray". And we knew we would be back.

We were already thinking about Psalm 22 as an Easter project - and how we might bring the pain and portent of those ancient words alive to a contemporary audience. I personally found the Psalm too heavy; too ponderous, too much. But there, amongst people who have known real suffering and hardship, it didn't take much at all. Those ancient words made total sense. They felt modern, of the here and now.

My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me? All of them had lived that first line; indeed they were still living it. For Rob, it was when his big brother killed himself; for Emma, it was losing her baby; for Brenda, it was the darkest time of her mother's enduring illness and eventual death.

I am poured out like water, my heart is like wax took Rob straight back to his old life living rough; shielding his emotions to survive the kicks, the abuse, the neglect. Building shelters out of old wooden palettes and making sure at least his dogs had eaten, even if he hadn't.

Be not far from me for trouble is near, was Howard's line. Howard, born in nearby Bradford, and living in a Christian rehabilitation home after leaving prison, found an early morning prayer meeting helped him cope with the sleeplessness brought on by heroin and methadone withdrawal.

His is a constant battle between walking in faith and crippling doubt.

I will declare your name to my people. In the assembly I will praise you. They call Saturday Gathering a 'fresh expression' of church. It grew out of a Food Bank run by an ecumenical volunteer group with a heart for the poor and the vulnerable, Christians Together in Calderdale. When the group started to offer prayer to those 100 - 150 regulars, they found people kept coming back, drawn to the prayer, drawn to the fellowship, drawn to the sense of family they found etched in the familiarity of the faces all around them. And when they found their prayers were being answered, they wanted to know more, but found traditional church, with all that entails, out of reach. So the Saturday Gathering was born. Come as you are. No questions asked.

Worship at the Gathering is a lively, chaotic mishmash of prayer, testimony and song. Children draw and make models in a corner. People walk in and walk out. Families argue, mobile phones buzz. The singing is uplifting, memorable and moving. People are encouraged to tell their stories and the stories are always the same. They are about transformation and love.

Then it's downstairs for dinner; tables pushed together, and a hot meal cooked by a volunteer chef with food donated by local businesses, stores, supermarkets and restaurants. Food dominates here. There is always food and a hot drink to be had, whatever time of the day or week you might arrive.

Your heart shall live forever. And it does. Every day they walk with Jesus. Every day is a testimony to their enduring, unquestioning love. Every day.

*Jane Bower*

*Communications Team, Diocese of West Yorkshire and the Dales*

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